

The difficulty in reporting diversity: training journalists to see outside the stereotype

Presented by Richard Walker and Deb Stanfield (Wintec) at the 2012 National New Zealand Communications Association Conference in Hamilton, 26-27 November 2012. The theme of the conference was "Divergence."

Abstract

One of the challenges of teaching journalism is preparing students with the skills to engage with a wide diversity of people. Reporting diversity presents a problem for mainstream media, which inevitably brings its own preconceptions to the stories it tells however there is increasing expectation in society that we value and include people whose voices have not been previously/traditionally heard. This piece of research seeks to evaluate the experience of fourteen third year Wintec Media Arts students who interviewed people living with intellectual disabilities.

The opportunity arose when Community Living, a Waikato-based organisation that supports people with intellectual disabilities, was looking to have its stories told. Students were briefed by Community Living staff, and then required to set up an interview, conduct the interview, and write the story. The students were members of a feature writing class in which all but one of the students were also studying journalism. The interview subjects were people supported by Community Living, a non-profit partner of Wintec. The initial stage of this research project involves surveying the students who wrote the features with the view of gaining further understanding of their experience; the extent to which they were challenged by interviewing people with intellectual disabilities, the extent to which the preparation helped, and their feelings about the results.

This research project aims at an improved teaching of diversity to journalism students and represents a beginning collaboration between the Schools of Media Arts, and Health and Social Practice which is hoped to provide a platform for future discussion of joint teaching/learning opportunities for students.

Presentation

The results of this initial research project were presented to participants in the form of a half hour workshop at the New Zealand Communications Association conference 26 November 2012 by Wintec tutors Richard Walker (journalism) and Deb Stanfield (social work). It was presented foremost as an evaluative project that sought to understand the success of a teaching project to inform future teaching; and secondarily as a formative study that sought advice about whether there is value in collaborative efforts between schools (journalism and social work) to support this learning. Some samples of the students' work was presented as well as some anecdotal responses to survey questions.

Overall Richard concluded that the students valued preparation and that this preparation appeared to make up for a general lack of prior experience of people living with intellectual disabilities. The theme of gaining direct understanding of the person being interviewed – as opposed to interviewing or writing skills – also came through with advice for future students. A consistent theme was to spend time with the interview subject before interviewing. Further areas to explore in the future included curiosity about how the experience influenced the students generally in the development of interviewing skills and insight into the nature of the experience for the interviewees.

Deb provided some background to the concept of professional and academic collaboration. Wintec, for example, has policies that invite and support the collaboration between tertiary education and industry and the collaboration between academic disciplines across campus. Collaborative practice is

a key feature of current social and health care practice with well acknowledged advantages for example, in the joint work of protecting children from abuse and neglect. There are some examples of collaboration between social work and journalism, however this is not an area of practice that has been extensively researched. Given the positive tutor experience of this joint piece of work, we are interested in considering future projects between schools. Some ideas in this regard are:

- Joint teaching of students from the schools, sharing skills and knowledge useful to both professions.
- Joint production of resources or material that supports learning and/or community services
- Joint research.

The theme of the conference, well introduced by the key note speaker Chris Williams (NZ advertising and marketing guru) was a focus on the significant paradigm shift over the last 25 years, on the role of media in society and the changing landscape because of social media and self-publishing opportunities. This clearly affects all aspects of society equally and the impact on social work and journalism, the challenges and opportunities arising are significant. Much of the conference focussed on use of technology in pedagogy, another key area of interest for tutors in both schools.

Deb Stanfield/Richard Walker